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Centennial Oration Delivered by Reverdy C. Ransom in Plymouth Church

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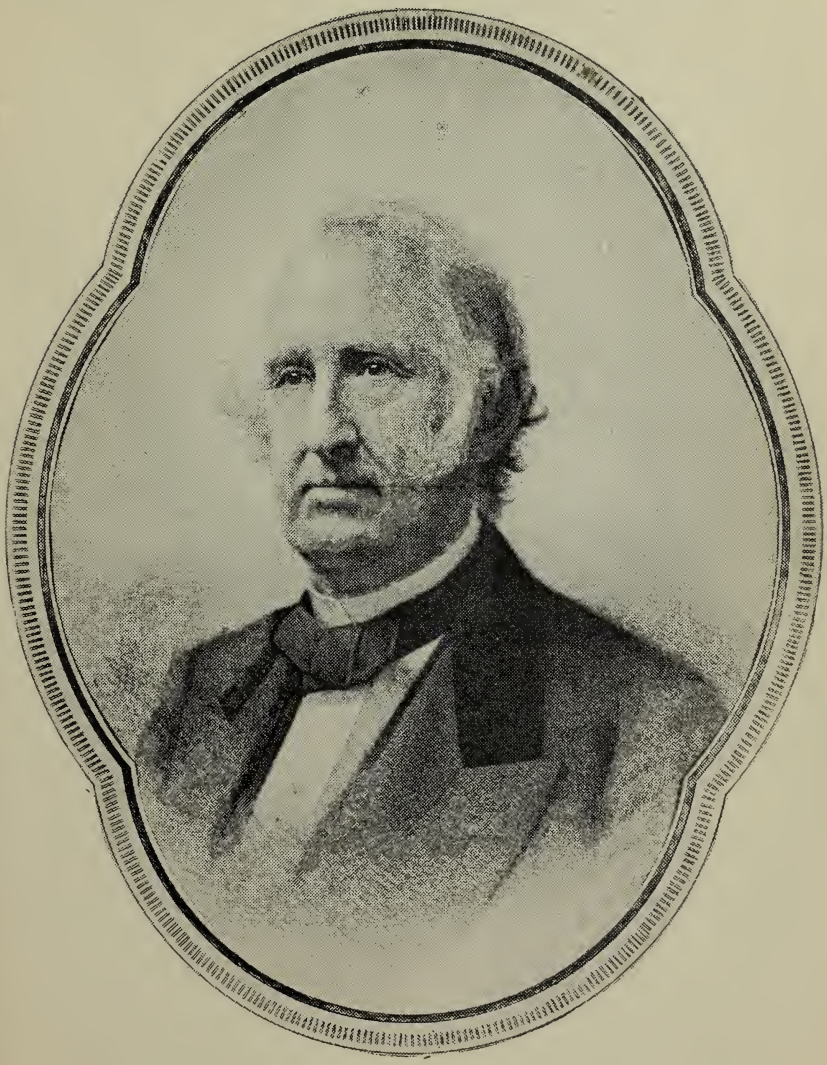

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Rev. Reverdy C. Ransom, D. D.

Who Delivered Oration at Wendell Phillips Centenary in Plymouth Church (Henry Ward Beecher's Famous Church)

November 29th, 1911 Brooklyn, New York

. . . WENDELL PHILLIPS . . .

THE tree of liberty will only bear fruit after its kind. It will not flourish when the foul birds of tyranny and oppression nest amid its boughs. It will not yield vitality or strength to any wild branch of slavery or serfdom that may be engrafted on its limbs. There are many, both at home and abroad, who are slow to learn that, while ready to acknowledge our debt both to England and to Europe, we are a new nation, in a new world, with a new form of government whose type of democracy is distinctively American.

When John Hancock laid down his pen and George Washington sheathed his sword, the fathers of our constitution completed the task of launching this republic to take its unique place among the nations of the earth. The compromises growing out of the slavery question, that were inserted in the constitution, were the chief blemish of their otherwise almost perfect work. This vital flaw prevented the realization of their high ideals and the fulfillment of their hopes. It at once arrayed against each other two hostile forces; it undertook the impossible task of uniting two irreconcilable principles—freedom and slavery.

The Negro question is the pivot around which this nation has revolved at every crucial hour of its history, from the foundation of the government until now.

While the Indian may rise against us in judgment, the Negro is now and ever has been, the sure and final test of the strength and progress of American democracy and Christianity. Would you behold the sky-line of our Christianity and democracy to-day? I point you to the present attitude of this nation toward the Negro.

From the adoption of our Federal Constitution until the abolition of slavery, there were those who saw and felt the enormity of the crime of ownership in human flesh. Of this increasing company, worthy to be called America's Immortals, William Lloyd Garrison was the chief, while Wendell Phillips was preeminent among those who stood in the foremost ranks.

One hundred years ago to-day, Wendell Phillips was born.

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His unselfish devotion to the cause of humanity has made not only black men, but, liberty-loving men and women everywhere, his debtors. His career is unique in the annals of American achievement. He has been called, "The Knight Errant of Humanity." His noble figure moved among us with all the kingly grace of a knight of the days of chivalry. He met the burning question of his time with dauntless courage and a faith that never wavered. His sword once drawn was never sheathed until the foe was vanquished. He counted not the odds against him, his confidence in the righteousness of his cause.

Wendell Phillips was not a child of the backwoods. He was born in Boston. He did not spring from the common people. Providence worked through six generations of the best Puritan stock of New England, to evolve in him an American gentleman of the highest type. His was not a struggle against poverty. The child of wealth, he was environed by an atmosphere of refinement in the most cultured city in America. A graduate of Harvard; he was admitted to the bar as a member of the legal profession with every prospect of a brilliant career. While a young man, as yet comparatively unknown, he stood in Faneuil Hall and heard James T. Austin, the attorney-general of Massachusetts, justify the men who murdered Lovejoy at Alton, Ill. Hot with indignation, he mounted the platform and delivered impromptu; a reply in scathing terms and with such crushing effect, that at a single stride he stepped from obscurity to fame. From that hour he broke the barriers of his social position; became deaf to the blandishments of wealth and honor, and with a self-abasement akin to that of the Son of God, he made himself of no reputation to become the friend and advocate of the lowly and despised.

The surroundings amid which these commemorative exercises here to-night are set, are significant, while lending added inspiration to the hour. We are within the walls of Plymouth Church, whose pulpit Henry Ward Beecher made famous throughout the English speaking world. At a time when the American pulpit was, for the most part, either dumb upon the evils of slavery, or threw about the iniquitous institution the sanctions of religion; Henry Ward Beecher stood here, a mighty Jove, hurling the hot thunderbolts of his wrath against it. He was one of the best friends the cause of freedom ever had. He has demonstrated the power and influence of the unmuzzled pulpit. He was much more concerned with the acts of the supporters of slavery than he was about the Acts of the Apostles. He

had the courage to do that, for lack of which the church and the un-churched masses are perishing to-day; he stood on the banks of the Hudson instead of the banks of the Jordan and applied the Gospel to the moral, political and sociable problems of his time. That which concerns us now is not that St. Paul, a member of a despised race, had his Roman citizenship insulted, but that ten millions of black American citizens may be robbed of their most sacred rights under the protection of our flag. Which to-day is of more vital importance; that St. Paul received thirty-nine lashes upon his back, or that thirty-nine American citizens have been lynched with fiendish ferocity in this year of grace?

After he had been mobbed out of two halls in New York City, Mr. Beecher, with characteristic courage, opened Plymouth Church to Mr. Phillips, to whim he refers as "the unagitated agitator—so calm, so fearless, so incisive—every word a bullet."

One of the chief distinctions Wendell Phillips justly earned and so well deserved, was to be called an "Agitator."

"Agitation," said he, "is an old word with a new meaning. Sir Robert Peel defined it to be 'the marshaling of the conscience of a nation to mould its laws.' Its means are reason and argument; no appeal to arms. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty; power is ever stealing from the many to the few. Only by continual oversight can the Democrat in office be prevented from hardening into a despot; only by unintermitted agitation can a people be kept sufficiently awake to principle not to let liberty be smothered in material prosperity. Republics exist only on the terms of being constantly agitated. Never, to our latest posterity, can we do without prophets like Garrison, to stir up the monotony of wealth and reawake the people to the great ideas that are constantly fading out of our minds—to trouble the waters that there may be health in their flow."

This favored epithet of injustice and oppression, is to-day brought forth from its pro-slavery archives, to be hurled at the noble men and women who are standing for justice to the Negro, in an effort to nullify and discredit their influence. "Agitators!" "Impracticables!" "Breeders of strife between the races!"

We should not count it strange that many who have enlisted in the unpopular cause of our poor and despised race have had their ardor chille dby the cold difference and unresponsivness of their friends, while many who continue with us as advocates of our cause, would compromise our blood bought and inalienable rights for political gain and social peace, to placate

opposition, and silence the voice of ridicule and censure from the weathervane press of America.

I voice the sentiments of millions of our race when I take the liberty to use the rostrum of Plymouth Church as a megaphone to-night, to say to the American people that—the Negro wants neither the money nor the sympathy of those who do not believe in his equality of manhood and who do not accord to him the same political rights; the same educational advantages, and the same freedom in every pathway of opportunity. He is neither ungrateful nor unresponsive, but having been so often plundered and betrayed, he prefers to stand and mark time rather than follow the leadership of men, organizations or parties, the genuineness of whose credentials he has not thoroughly examined and the unrightness of whose motives has not been clearly disclosed. The traitors within the ranks of our race are known. They have neither our confidence nor our hearts. What standing they have is due to the powerful support which is given them by misguided men of great wealth, by politicians, who for personal or partisan advantage, would use them to profit by the vanishing remnants of the Negro's political power, and by a newspaper press whose approving voice is the mouthpiece of a decadent public opinion, which would let the Negro question "work itself out" under the baneful influence of the many degrading forms of Jim Crowism.

At a time of recrudence of sentiment against the Negro, the friends of freedom have eagerly seized upon the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of William Lloyd Garrison, John Greenleaf Whittier, Elijah P. Lovejoy, John Brown, Charles Summer and Harriet Beecher Stowe, as a means of awakeningthe public conscience and creating a public opinion in favor of justice to the Negro. So to-night in this celebration of the centenary of the birth of Wendell Phillips, we are here not so much to tell what he did then, as to point to what we, who would honor his memory, should do now. He stood for truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, for equal right and justice to all, without equivocation or compromise. While his spirit looks down upon us to-night from the star-crowned heights to which he has ascended to sit enthroned high by the side of Garrison and Summer, we are here to reconsecrate and dedicate ourselves anew, not only to the cause of justice and equality to the Negro, but to humanity, without regard to race or sex, to color or to creed. The carrying power of our voices may not reach, perchance, the ears of this mighty metropolis, much less the coun-

try at large, but if under the power of this new baptism we continue to cry aloud with no uncertain sound, the nation, the Supreme Court, the press and even the pulpit will hear. The spirit in which we agitate is needed for rescue and perpetuity of our American Democracy; it is needed to arouse the Negroes themselves; to arise and take an unyielding stand while a vestige of the rich dower, which was handed them on the point of a million bayonets remains. This is not the time to use rose water or the speech and manners of the drawing room. To paraphrase the words in which Daniel 'Connell justified his course in seeking to wring from England justice for Ireland: The hearts of Negroes are so cowed, and most white Americans are so arrogant, that it needs independence verging on insolence, and a defiance that will touch extreme limits, to breathe self-respect into my own race; teach our aggressors manners; and, sober them into respectful attention.

Wendell Phillips was a Disunionist for twenty years. At the beginning of his career as an agitator, he took his stand outside of the church; he wore the label of no political party; he refrained from voting and repudiated the Constitution as a slave holding document. Thus he stood, a man without a country; free and untrammelled to wage relentless warfare against the slave power and all of the inuences that upheld it. Garrison's slogan—" No Union with Slave Holders," was on all occasions his "Delenda est Carthago. The course which Mr. Phillips persistently followed until success crowned his labors is best justified in his own words:

"I was a Disunionist sincerely, for twenty years. I did hate the union, when union meant lies in the pulpit and mobs in the streets, when union meant making white men hypocrites and black men slaves. I did prefer purity to peace—I acknowledge it. I did prefer disunion to being the accomplice of tyrants. I, indeed, thought man more than constitutions, humanity and justice of more worth than law."

But when God's hour struck in answer to the signal from Fort Sumpter, "Missouri Compromises," "Kansas-Nebraska Bills," and "Fugitive Slave Laws," were swept aside as dust in the balances, and Wendell Phillips found himself at last within the union. He was among the organizers of the first black regiments, the 55th and 56th Massachusetts, which, under the leadership of Colonel Shaw and the Hallowell Brothers, marched down State street in Boston to the music of "John Brown's

Body" over the very spot where a Negro, Crispus Attucks, gave the first blood to consecrate America to freedom.

Wendell Phillips labored to make the Constitution conform to the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation; the victories of Sheridan and Sherman, Meade and Grant, put Jefferson Davis to flight and completely subdued the South's power of armed resistance. The South sued for peace; not because it had changed its attitude; not because its baptism of fire, through four years of bloody war had converted it to Sumner's view of the barbarism of slavery; but, because God had made it helpless by pressing the bitter cup of its iniquities to its lips, until it had been drained to the dregs.

When the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, was passed by Congress, Mr. Garrison and other influential members of the American Anti-Slavery Society, believed that it should dissolve, that its members should work through other channels to accomplish that which remained to be done for the freedmen. Mr. Phillips differed; Frederick Douglass, Robert Pervis, and a large majority of the society stood with him. He believed that the freedom of the blacks should be sealed, not alone by emancipation, but by citizenship and the ballot. Without civil rights and citizenship they were only half free. On the question of the Negro's enfranchisement, he declared that—"the black man without the ballot is the lamb given over to the wolf." He held the American Anti-Slavery Society together, as its president, until the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were passed by Congress, and ratified by the requisite number of states. This act of Mr. Phillips reveals the full stature of the man; it shows the breadth of his comprehension of the whole question involved in freedom, and entitles him more than any other to our gratitude and veneration.

Harsh as it may sound in this hour of compromise and surrender, we hold that Wendell Phillips was right when he declared—"I want a right hand stern as death, and a sword, rough ground; like those with which Wellington went into the Battle of Waterloo, held over every Southern state, to secure that peace which promotes industry." If the South had conquered the North, it would indeed have called the roll of its slaves on Bunker Hill and put its flag over the Capitol at Washington. The events of the past forty years have abundantly demonstrated that the spirit of the Rebellion, though humbled, has never been conquered. The climax at Appomatox should have been fol-

lowed by planting in the South the civilization of the North—respect for free labor, the North of equality, education, toleration—the North of books and brains. The South did not lay down its arms when Lee surrendered his sword to Grant. It only changed its weapons. Now it works by intrigue, fraud, nullification, dishumanizing laws, and by blackening the Negro's character before the world by painting him as a monster who menaces the safety of its womanhood and the preservation of good government and civilization. Its most effective emissaries are not the Tillmans, Hoke Smiths and Vardamans, who may sit in Congress, but the soft-voiced women and men of engaging manners, who sit in Northern drawing-rooms and insidiously make converts to the South's method of dealing with the Negro. Bright Southern boys are on the reportorial staff and in the editorial rooms of the great daily papers of the North, to season every news item relating to the Negro with the Southern flavor, and to paint him in a manner generally that either discounts or discredits him. They have even invaded the theatre, and under the guise of the drama seek to inflame Northern prejudice.

In the face of this systematic campaign, the North has stood by with its old ante bellum attitude of concession and compromise, while the South, through these means and an obliging United States Supreme Court, has regained practically all it lost upon the field of battle. Under slavery the South counted three-fifths of the blacks in the enumeration for representation in Congress, now it counts them all; but, by unconstitutional methods excludes them from the franchise. It has thus, under freedom, increased its proportion of representation in Congress over the North, by two-fifths of the number it held under slavery.

This question of the South's method of dealing with the Negro has come to be as sacred as was the question of slavery in the days of Mr. Phillips. To demand the enforcement of the Ffteenth Amendment to-day is to be branded as "an enemy of both races," "a frantic," "a mischievous agitator." To all outside interference the South says: "Leave the Negro to us, we understand him, and know best how to deal with him, both for his own good and the peace and welfare of the South." President Taft, who has boldly committed himself to the doctrine of race discrimination, pipes his grand dirapason in harmony with this sentiment by declaring, that the Negro "ought to come and is coming more and more under the guardianship of the South!"

With far more justification, we reply on behalf of the Negro

—Leave the Southern white people to us. We have lived among them for two and a half centuries, we both know and understand them. We have nursed their children; built their homes, and for more than two hundred years, we have fed and clothed them. When they took up arms to destroy the Union in order to bind us in perpetual chains, we did not fire their cities with the torch, nor rise in violence against them, but protected their property, their helpless women and children. Leave them to us. We have imbibed, not the ideals of feudalism, but of democracy; we are Americans filled with the spirit of the twentieth century. Leave them to us, and we will make the free public school universal throughout the South and open alike to all, without regard to race, creed or color. We will make free speech as safe in Mississippi as it is in Massachusetts; we will abolish lynching, and usher in a reign of law, of courts and juries, instead of the shot gun, the faggot and the mob. We will abolish peonage, elevate and protect labor and make capital secure. Leave them to us, our chivalry shall know no color line; but, all womanhood shall be protected and defended, and all citizens, regardless of race or color, shall be permitted to participate in the government under which they live. Leave them to us, and we will make them know their place and keep it, under the Constitution as amended. We will remove the last vestige of Jim Crowism under the forms of law,, and make the places of public necessity, convenience, recreation and amusement, open alike to all without respect to race or color. We will make intelligence, character and worth, instead of race and color, the sole test of recognition and preferment for all. Thus as North and South divided over the Negro, so would the Negro unite them in the only bond of union that can stand the test of time—fraternity, justice, righteousness.

There is a strong effort to make out a case against the Negro as "the sick man of America." His case has been diagnosed by doctors of every school of thought, who have treated him for all deadly diseases in the mental, moral, social, industrial and political catalogue. Yet he continues to grow strong on the same meat and exercise that are the daily bread of all normally healthy Americans. The trouble is not with the Negro, but with the physicians who are paranoiacs on the Negro question.

There are those to-day who tell us that the enfranchisement of the black man was a mistake, that it should have been left to time to gradually prepare him to exercise the ballot. So there were those calling themselves Abolitionists, who advocated

"gradual emancipation." But Wendell Phillips, with Garrison and his compeers, stood for "immediate and unconditional emancipation." After nearly fifty years of freedom, are the disfranchising States seeking to gradually prepare the Negro for the franchise, when they obstruct his path to the ballot box with every obstacle that legal ingenuity can devise? Does any honest person believe that the disfranchising states ever would, if left to themselves, or ever will, if let alone, permit the Negro to become gradually prepared for the ballot? Let us be honest and say, that this lament about the untimeliness of the Fifteenth Amendment is a dishonest subterfuge and a lie. Let us be frank, as some are, and declare that "Constitution or no constitution, character, education and property to the contrary; this is a white man's government and white men are going to rule it."

As Wendell Phillips took his stand outside the Constitution, while it sanctioned slavery, so to-day the only impregnable position we can take, is to plant our feet upon the Constitution as amended and stand there without compromise, not altering a clause, or changing a single word. The Fifteenth Amendment a mistake? If we erase the names of the men who supported its adoption, with them would be blotted out the major portion of names that have made our country's history worth recording for the last fifty years.

Wendell Phillips was the friend and advocate of liberty and justice for humanity throughout the world. He cheered the triumph of the labors of Mazzini and Garibaldi for the liberation of Italy; by sympathy and co-operation, he made himself the friend and fellow-countryman of Curran and Grattan, O'Connell and Parnell in their labors for Home Rule for Ireland. He was one of the earliest advocates of woman's suffrage, and took his stand with Mary A. Livermore and Lidia Maria Child. He espoused the cause of organized labor, and affirmed "as a fundamental principle, that labor, as the creator of wealth, is entitled to all it creates." But we will not trespass on the limitations placed upon us to dwell on his activities in these and other fields; nor yet upon his tender devotion to his wife, whom he nursed through forty years of invalidism, playing the lover's part with such a wealth of affection as to make their domestic life idyllic. It is ours to make his services on behalf of freedom, the burden of our theme.

Wendell Phillips was the relentless foe of the caste spirit of his day. As early as 1846 he appealed to the school-committee of

Boston to admit colored children to the public schools with the whites. He continued, with the co-operation of the enlightened colored people, to press the cause until the point was won. This victory he pronounced "the triumph of law and justice over the pride of caste and wealth." Now, after more than fifty years, comes forth the Hon. William Howard Taft, President of the United States, by grace of the Republican Party, to declare that the Negroes should be educated differently from the whites. He allows us a few colleges where our ministers, teachers, lawyers and doctors may receive a liberal education, but gives us no place in the great universities, scientific and technical schools of this, our native land. Would the President dare offer such insulting suggestions, or advice to his Irish, Jewish or Italian fellow citizens? This from the head of a nation which professes to give without distinction, equal opportunities to all.

Why does this learned judge so interpret the spirit of our American Democracy? Is it not because he believes he voices the sentiments of the majority of the American people? Is this because the Negro has demonstrated his incapacity to take his place in all avenues of the nation's life? No—it is because he, and those who think with him, would train their black fellow citizens to continue to hold an inferior or secondary place—to be America's black peasants.

Men tell us we should point the Negro to things of solid achievement rather than assail the barriers that obstruct his way. Have the Irish waited for banks and farms and industries during the four hundred years they have agitated for home rule? Did the Colonists wait for these things before they rebelled against the tyranny of George III? Of what value are artisans and mechanics, money and lands, if a city council, or State Legislature, may prescribe the locality, or spot of ground, whereon you may breathe God's air under your own vine and fig tree?

We are told to get money to get land and to qualify for practical service and then we will get our rights. Why not tell that to the Jews of Russia, or to the Armenians under Turkish rule, with whom this country so strongly sympathizes? Give us those rights for which a million men faced death through four years of bloody war; those rights which the most enlightened statesmen since the days of Lincoln, Grant and Sumner have labored to secure—the rights common to other citizens; and then, like other citizens, we will willingly work and wait with patience, for business and money, houses and lands to be added unto us.

The apologists for slavery, who sought to guild that iniquity with elegance, called it "industrial subordination." So now, disfranchisement and other forms of Jim Crowism are defended in the name, not of democracy, but of "the preservation of Anglo Saxon civilization." None of the elements of our population, except in the color of their skin and the lust for blood, are more purely Anglo-Saxon in character, aspirations and ideals, than the American of African descent.

In the time of Wendell Phillips, the slave-holding oligarchy made the Democratic Party the bulwark of slavery; the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party, and the Whig Party, each recognized slavery under various forms of compromise; he would have none of them. He refused to recognize slavery as either local or sectional; he believed that freedom should be universal.

As Mr. Phillips believed he could best serve the cause of freedom by refraining from all political affiliation, so we to-day can best secure our complete emancipation by agressive political independence. Our most powerful weapon of defense is the ballot. How much do our opponents care for the force of our logic, or the power of our arguments? We must have voice in choosing the hands that hold the reins of power.

The Democratic Party has not placed upon the statute books of the nation a single law on behalf of justice to the Negro. To-day it defends disfranchisement and upholds repression. The Republican Party, once the friend and champion of justice and equal rights, in its worship of the golden calf, has belied its professions and betrayed the trust of a confiding race. If the Socialists have the courage to be true to their programme and take up the great moral questions which the old parties have abandoned, then all men who love justice and hate oppression may turn to them.

Fie on a party name when it does not mean as much to a black man as it does to a white man; as much to a poor man as it does to a rich man; as much to a woman as it does to a man. The Negro should rally to the standard of justice by whomsoever carried, regardless of party name. He should seek to drive from office every man who, by vote or influence, has joined with the enemies of his race, and rather let his arm be paralyzed, than cast a ballot for a man who will not unequivocally pledge himself to equal rights and privileges for all.

The Negro must keep books, record events and remember names. He must refuse the leadership of those men of his race

who have surrendered the rights of their people for the honors and emoluments of office or the bribe of gold. When charged with ingratitude because he refuses to follow those who have deserted the cause of freedom, let him remind them that the Arch Deceiver, the devil, was also once an angel of light.

Let no one be deceived by the prophets who prophecy lies, or by the wise men who imagine a vain thing. Just in proportion as the Negro has grown in character, wealth, intelligence and industrial efficiency, so has he been disfranchised, jim crowed, and relegated to the place of a menial in the industrial world. Standing under the flag whose folds, on behalf of freedom, have been consecrated by the blood of our fathers, may not the men of this race plead for equal justice before the war amendments to the Constitution have been repudiated and the principles of Wendell Phillips have perished from our land?

We offer no newly discovered panacea for the ills that afflict us; we have no chimerical scheme for the solution of our race problem. The ground we stand upon is as old as justice. The Negroes are not going to be colonized into a separate state or territory; given a man's chance, they are satisfied to remain where they are. They are not going to Africa, except it be to follow the cross of Christ, or the flag of our Country, on some errand of humanity or civilization.

We have resolved that this country shall neither be our prison nor our tomb. Our ears have heard a strange music through the years—the clanking of chains; the crack of the lash; and the breaking of fetters amid the cannon's roar. We have heard the shout of triumph and the song of freedom rise above the voice of mourning where a nation wept over the graves of the slain. Since we came from the darkness of slavery, the white light of freedom has not blinded our eyes to the unscaled heights that lie before us. We are not pointing backward to monuments of achievement in the past, but forward to the heights we would attain. We are carrying a weight of ignorance and poverty, we confess; we ask not that others bear our burden; but, do not obstruct our pathway, and we will throw off our burdens as we run. The white man held on to us in the days of slavery; we are holding on to him in the day of freedom, and we will not let hm go until we are seated securely by his side in the full enjoyment of every right which he holds as his most sacred heritage.